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SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY--SULAIMANIYAH: YOUTH GROUPS
STIFFLED BY PUK INTERFERENCE

Classified By: Classified By: Regional Coordinator Jess Baily for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) Erbil Cable.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Youth groups in Sulaimaniyah Province, Iraqi Kurdistan, complain of wide-spread political party interference in the leadership and day to day operations of their activities. They expected greater freedom after 2003 but are still unable to act independently or discuss reform proposals which aim to make the political process more democratic. The youth feel the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) dominates most spheres of public life: education, employment, the economy, and the media - and their efforts to become independent will require endorsement and financial support from international organizations or foreign governments. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

¶2. (C) This telegram summarizes the discussions RRT Off had in Sulaimaniyah Province on July 1, August 3 and 15, and in Erbil, August 21. Among the participants were Kurdistan Student Development Organization (KSDO), Kurdistan Youth Development Association (KYDA), Student Solidarity Organization (SSO), Association for Scientific Research (ARA), Youth Activities Developing Center (YADC), Kurdistan Student Union, and the Governor of Sulaimaniyah, Dana Ahmed Majid. Some of the members of the youth organizations are PUK members but none are in a leadership position.

¶3. (C) The youth groups told RRTOff that the young generation in Sulaimaniyah falls into two broad categories. The first are the educated and urban youth who have traveled outside Iraq or speak a foreign language. Some of them are former or current PUK members and feel stifled by the party while others struggle with being excluded by PUK in terms of funding and economic opportunities. The second category is the apolitical, uneducated, unskilled working class youth who fight to survive economically and live in both the cities and rural, isolated areas.

CRITIQUE OF THE PUK

¶4. (C) The young people had the following common remarks on the impact of the PUK on youth development:

-- the party denies youth groups the basic freedom of expression, public assembly, and open dialogue with a broad sector of society. It also discourages interaction with foreign youth groups via the internet or with the independent press.

-- the party interferes in program design and leadership

election of youth groups. Party members also use intimidation techniques to prevent youth groups from discussing freely the future of Iraqi Kurdistan politics.

-- the PUK is out of touch with the youth and public opinion. PUK youth organizations do not represent the views of the new generation or support the rights of the youth. The PUK promotes the status quo and the interest of the party and has little interest in the general public.

-- employment and educational opportunities depend on party membership and connections. In particular, admission into graduate programs is linked to party membership rather than academic excellence. The party-dominated university uses outmoded curriculum that fails to meet current demands of the labor market. Party-affiliation over merit drives decisions about staffing, scholarships, grading, and access to resources. The university therefore lacks the impetus to make needed changes or hold administration and faculty accountable for student performance.

-- party members who are directors of secondary schools or university professors use the educational facilities as venues for party recruitment.

CONSEQUENCES

15. (C) As a result of perceived injustices and limited freedoms in the PUK, KYDA said in June 2007, 133 of the 369 KYDA members left the party and announced it was establishing an independent youth association, making them the first youth

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group to split entirely from the PUK.

16. (C) Since the establishment of the Kurdistan Youth Development Association (KYDA), its members report having greater difficulty with finding jobs and are being watched by intelligence services (Asayish). They also mentioned the licensing process for KYDA has slowed down; if the license is not granted, they will launch a youth demonstration.

17. (C) The various youth groups said the culture of party dominance has prevented the younger generation from developing self-reliance and critical thinking. They added these qualities are crucial for devising independent reform programs. KYDA members observed that the youth lack the experience of saying no to government and political parties or working through disagreements and debating with political leaders. Since 2003, the youth perceive the PUK to be financially stronger but less popular.

18. (C) Youth groups told RRT they have not become the "motor of change" in Iraqi Kurdistan with a stake in influencing society and the political process. So they were complaining about their inability to effect change and reform. They stressed that university students should be the source of alternative social values and reform ideas but the university has become a place for promoting the party and rewarding PUK family members with degrees.

19. (C) The Governor of Sulaimaniyah told RRT Off that the PUK pressures the student unions of Sulaimaniyah Province to elect party members to their leadership positions. In the recent 2007 elections, the PUK won leadership positions by 20 votes whereas secretary level vacancies were filled by other candidates.

THE WAY FORWARD

110. (SBU) The youth groups had a long list of program

activities to implement and assistance requests. The first is a series of awareness campaigns on individual rights (notably for the youth in isolated rural areas), social issues such as basic health care, drug addiction, women's rights, and family values.

¶11. (C) Second, these young people want to do public outreach to a broad spectrum of civil society and then disseminate their findings through an independent newspaper, website, and radio station. Their reporting activities would include government and PUK corruption practices.

¶12. (SBU) Third, the youth groups want increased linkages to USG officials and foreign youth organizations. This could be through exchange programs, training opportunities, or financial assistance to cover operation costs or to build youth centers. They believe independent youth centers can structure leisure time productively and provide a venue for the exchange of ideas and public meetings.

¶13. (SBU) Fourth, the student groups want to create an English-language association at the University of Sulaimaniyah to lobby the administration for changes to the English curriculum.

¶14. (C) COMMENT: The young people of Sulaimaniyah are frustrated with pervasive party interference in the public space, including the spheres of education, employment, the media, and the market. It is clear that the events of 2003 raised expectations among them regarding freedom of expression, assembly, and individual rights. The PUK, however, continues to keep the youth as well as NGO activities under their direct or indirect control through intimidation and wide-reaching political and economic power bases.

¶15. (C) The KYDA break from the PUK is a relatively bold move but the members feel without political backing from a prominent international organizations or the USG, they remain vulnerable. RRT Off confirmed her willingness to keep a dialogue open with the groups, informed them of US public affairs programs, Quick Response Funds for specific projects, and training opportunities with National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute.
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